Rethinking Christian Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: The Futures of the Past

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Summary

This chapter presents two interrelated arguments. First, it argues that in recent decades there has been a startling interruption in the transmission of the memory of Christian Democracy; a political force that had a central influence on Continental Europe in the second half of the twentieth century has to a surprising extent faded into oblivion. Second, it argues that Christian Democracy was not simply a constellation of ideas and concepts but a distinct form of political spirituality and a political model that reincorporated transcendence as a legitimate perspective of truth and reason, re-anchoring democracy, justice and freedom in a religiously argued ethos. The proposition defended here is that the Christian Democratic search for a meaningful politics imbued with spiritual significance is relevant as never before.

Introduction

This chapter takes its departure from a series of questions: Is a Catholic-inspired Christian Democracy relevant today, in Europe and beyond, vis-à-vis the complex challenge of today's global politics? Can we use Christian Democracy to mirror the increasing concerns about a body politic disillusioned with representative democratic politics and prey to trickster-like politicians? My answer is hesitantly affirmative—though what the mirror throws back is anything but straightforward—but needs to be qualified with a clear understanding of what Christian Democracy was in European politics after the experience of war and totalitarianism. The main argument here is that Christian Democracy might be understood, *pace* Michel Foucault, as a distinct form of political spirituality. Such an existential and spiritual dimension, neglected by scholars and forgotten by politicians, was a decisive factor in the shaping of Christian Democratic politics and might still be a resource for rethinking a meaningful politics in a world driven by global capitalism and populist anti-globalisation.

Forgetting Christian Democracy?

The heyday of Christian Democracy has long gone (Conway 2003). The European People's Party (EPP), which has its roots in Christian Democracy, describes itself as a 'centre–right' party and is often described as 'conservative'. It encompasses national parties that either never identified as Christian Democratic or no longer do. The ideological identity of the EPP has been watered down, and the process accelerated with the successive waves of expansion of the EU.

However, somewhat paradoxically, politicians from the centre to the extreme right of the political spectrum have in recent times appropriated and adopted the symbolism, language and ideology of Christian Democracy. Most notably, Viktor Orbán has time and again made his claim on it. In 2018, at a conference held in memory of Helmut Kohl, he said: 'For us Central Europeans, Helmut Kohl is the exemplar for the Christian European. He represented the Christian Europe to which we have always belonged, and after forty years of communism his political will paved the way for our return to the community of the peoples of Europe' (Orbán 2018).

On this occasion, Orbán announced his decision to 'continue standing' within the EPP, thus abandoning the idea of establishing 'a new formation from like-minded Central European parties—or indeed, a pan-European anti-immigration formation'. He continued: 'But I suggest that we resist this temptation and stand by Helmut Kohl's ideals and party family. Instead of desertion, we should take on the more difficult task of renewing the European People's Party, and helping it to find its way back to its Christian democratic roots.'

He then concluded, calling for 'a Christian democratic renaissance' and for a Christian politics 'able to protect people, our nations, families, our culture rooted in Christianity, and equality between men and women', in short, 'our European way of life'.

However, in February 2020, after Fidesz left the EPP just before it was kicked out,[1] Orbán drafted a three-page memorandum for the European Christian Democrats. This is a remarkable document for anyone interested in political ideologies, which fully reflects the political and ideological confusion of today's European and global politics. Instead of addressing internal procedures, Orbán argued for a series of values and principles that should motivate the EPP, and that the EPP had abandoned.

He wrote:

> Instead of stepping up against communism and Marxism, which left behind a painful legacy in Europe, we are applauding Fidel Castro and Karl Marx. Instead

1. The EPP had suspended Fidesz since 2019 but their lawmakers had continued to enjoy rights and privileges as members of the EPP's European Parliament faction.

> of the Christian-social Rhine model, we embrace egalitarian, socialistic social theories. . . . [W]e gave up the family model based on the matrimony of one woman and one man, and fell into the arms of gender ideology. Instead of supporting the birth of children, we see mass migration as the solution to our demographic problems. . . . We don't stand up for ourselves as old and great Europeans, and don't take on the fight against left-liberal intellectual forces and the media they influence and control. . . . We are not raising our voice loud enough against the socialists who are helping the radical anarchist communist left into government. We have created an impression that we are afraid to declare and openly accept who we are and what we want. (Orbán, cited in Paternotte and Verloo 2021, 556–7)

In short, against the ethical capitulation to the liberal left, Orbán urged the leaders of the EPP to reclaim its Christian values, to remain faithful to its ideals that prevent the sliding of the Christian right towards the left and to ensure the salvation of Europe against its enemies.

Undoubtedly, the appeal to preserve the pure, uncontaminated Christian values of Christian Democracy might be seen as instrumental. In reality, Christian Democracy, which slowly emerged from late-nineteenth-century attempts to reconcile Christianity (particularly Catholicism) with political modernity, has never been a political weapon of the Vatican or a confessional party. Christian Democrats never declared Catholicism the religion of state and often foiled some of the Vatican's hope, such as its request that only Catholic marriages would be legalised. They instead carved a space for political action independent from the church, descending from Christian beliefs but directed to the temporal common good, that did not always dovetail with the demands of the Holy See. Morality and strictly confessional beliefs were confined to individual choices. After the Second World War, Christian Democracy articulated and developed political–institutional and socio-economic platforms that ushered Continental Europe into a stable democratic age. It implemented a welfare state and articulated a specific response to the challenge of post-Fascist democracy. It significantly contributed to the founding of the European Community. The establishment of strong Christian Democratic parties in Europe ended up affirming the principle of secularity within politics, at both the national and European levels, and establishing that while religion in general—and Catholicism in particular—can serve as a cultural mould and moral ground for acting in politics, it can never determine its actual outcome.

Yet, what is particularly relevant and puzzling in the quarrels between Orbán and the EPP is the thorough mystification of Christian Democracy and its political and cultural tradition. At the basis of Orbán's argument, there is a very selective and biased, and ultimately wrong, idea of what Christian Democracy is.

The appropriation of the language and symbolism of Christian Democracy by Orbán and other nativist right-wing politicians has much to do with a process of forgetting. The history and politics of Christian Democracy, a political force which had a critical influence on Continental Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, has to a surprising extent disappeared into oblivion. This forgetting has two sources. First, it is 'passively' produced by the heirs of Christian Democracy itself, that is, the EPP; to my knowledge, nobody from within the ranks of the EPP confronted Orbán, rejecting his problematic, to say the least, reading. Second, it is 'actively' produced by politicians who operate through trickster-like modalities of power that leave the past without any trace, artfully creating a political vacuum through erasure. This interruption of memory has problematically allowed Orbán and others to present themselves as the ultimate heirs of Christian Democracy as well as the Christian saviours of Europe.

What is Christian Democracy?

Scholars and commentators continue to neglect or misunderstand Christian Democracy. They see Christian Democracy as a form of sheer conservatism or a cover for liberalism and capitalism, or an expedient combination of conservatism, socialism and liberalism. They often adopt a strategic perspective that ultimately sees Christian Democracy as instrumental in stabilising the post-war democratic order in a conservative and moderate vein, thus proposing an overly secular and political ideological reading of its emergence in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Others write that Christian Democracy 'lacks a conceptual anchor that distinguishes it clearly from other strands of political thought' (Müller 2020), a claim that is highly problematic and fundamentally wrong.

Luckily, other scholars have recognised the need to understand Christian Democracy and Catholic politics in a deeper way. Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2019) has explored the key concepts elaborated through time by Catholic social thought and philosophy that became the essential platform on which Christian Democracy created the European post-war order. Subsidiarity (the idea that decision-making should be taken as closely as possible to the citizens) and personalism (the view of the 'person', as opposed to the individual, as a creature embedded in multiple communities: from the family to the workplace, from the town to the nation to the supranational community, and to humanity) were two of the most crucial of these concepts.

Furthermore, the Christian Democratic effort at building a modern welfare state was tightly linked to the notion of a 'social market economy' (*Soziale Marktwirschaft*) which, unlike the Scandinavian and Northern European model, had a *remedial* structure. It was based on an organic conception in which the various sections of society had different roles and functions to fulfil; if they were incapable of fulfilling the roles, the

state should step in, creating the conditions for establishing their social functions for the benefit of the temporal common good. The ultimate function of such a specific type of social welfare was to promote harmony and reconciliation between social classes. Therefore, the overcoming of divisions and fractures within society pervaded the social market economy in Germany as designed by its main proponent Ludwig Erhard (West German minister for economic affairs from 1949 to 1963). Erhard and his advisors wanted to transcend the idea of endemic conflict in economic activity—conflict which he dubbed as 'pointless quarreling'. Erhard wrote: '[T]he reshaping of our economic order had to work towards two things: to bring to an end this division, which hampered progressive development, and to end with it ill-feeling between the rich and the poor' (Erhard 1958, 2–3). This effort towards a socially progressive politics was based on what Christian Democratic thinkers and politicians called the 'preferential option for the poor' or, in the words of Giorgio La Pira (mayor of Florence in the 1950s) 'the expectations of poor people'.

Finally, Christian Democrats came to elaborate specific notions of 'nation' and 'people' that stand in palpable contrast with the 'nation' and the 'people' as defended and proposed by nativist and nationalistic politicians. The former are not defined by their opposite and therefore do not have confrontational, exclusionary and ethnic meanings, tied to land and blood. The Christian Democratic concepts of nations and people refer to an epistemology and cosmology of inclusion, solidarity and commonality—in short to a set of positive values that come from within the body politic and promote reconciliation and the overcoming of fractures and divisions at all levels of the political community (see also Forlenza 2017).

As Invernizzi Accetti has further argued, the real values and principles of Christian Democracy—particularly the 'people/popularism' as opposed to the 'people/populism'—might be a better reference point for the social and political demands of religious and conservative constituencies. In this view, Christian Democracy, a force more committed to the health and stability of democracy, should compete for support with far-right nationalist movements. This means that Christian Democracy should claim back and re-appropriate its language and symbolism, recovering its history.

Christian Democracy as political spirituality

Yet Christian Democracy was much more than a set of concepts and policies. It was also, as Danish social theorist Bjørn Thomassen and I have written, a distinct form of 'political spirituality' (Forlenza and Thomassen 2024a; 2024b). By political spirituality, we refer to the much-contested concept introduced in the late 1970s by Michel Foucault. Foucault wrote a series of articles for Italian and French newspapers,

reporting from the spot on the revolutionary situation in Iran in the autumn of 1978. In an article written for *Le Novel Observateur* in October 1978 and titled 'What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?', he described the political imaginaries of the protesters as tied to a 'political spirituality'. Foucault was fiercely criticised for this and other writings on Iran (not least because of the subsequent political developments under Khomeini).

Leaving aside these criticisms relating to the Iranian context, we intend 'political spirituality' as a search for new foundations and a new way to establish a regime of truth and government of the self and others. Political spirituality does not imply a predefined set of religious beliefs that can be applied to the political realm, a politics informed by religious conviction or a political action grounded in religious faith. It is something other than basing political action on religious doctrine. Political spirituality, instead, involves a reflexive searching for a 'new way', but one that draws on pre-existing repertoires of tradition and cultural meanings, from which an endogenous political project can be formulated. It is a transformative activity that involves an open searching, moving beyond itself: a challenge to the status quo that, while anchored in 'traditions', at the same time calls into question one's own lifestyle, convictions and epistemological regimes. In the historical juncture which we examine, this rediscovery of a sense of the spiritual invested Catholic politics with a new intensity; it was not just about changing society, but about changing people, starting with themselves.

Conclusion

At a first glance, Christian Democracy in the post-war period might be seen as a useful container, or a hodgepodge of conservatism, liberalism and socialism. This reading fails to recognise the spiritual sources that guided the political measures taken by Christian Democrats—measures that may have appeared to be merely pragmatic and relativistic but were not. The spiritual inspiration of Christian Democracy provided the foundational basis for a new democracy and a meaningful politics, without reverting to a pre-liberal order that had simply proved itself defenceless against the threat of totalitarianism and aggressive nationalism. The transcendent inspiration at the centre of this political spirituality—also in the secular sense of overcoming fractures and divisions within society, healing the maladies of the world—emerged as a new marker of certainty that could ground and direct the democratic experience of post–Second World War and post-Fascist Europe.

I am fully aware that historical analogies are broadly problematic for obvious reasons. Each historical situation is unique. Yet, the disaffection with democratic politics, the socio-economic and existential crisis, and the loss of sense of home pervading large swathes of European people—what unimaginative commentators define with

the analytically obfuscating and theoretically disabling notion of populism—are eerily resemblant of tragic moments in European history. As in many times in the past, we are living not simply in a socio-economic crisis but in a historical situation where the sentiments of fear, confusion and existential uncertainty are real enough. To tackle seriously the resentment of the losers of cosmopolitan neoliberal globalisation—those left behind; strangers at home; protagonists of deep stories of resentment, loss and fear—requires changing the conversation from the neoliberal concerns of the past 50 years. It requires finding alternative and different visions of the social than those provided by the empty shell of 'neoliberalism' to give direction to society, the economy and politics.

The likelihood of the rebirth of a strong and hegemonic Christian Democracy is minimal. Arguably, Christian Democracy is a project of the past, no longer possible to revitalise in a post-secular, multicultural society, in today's global world. Yet, the need for a political thought transcending liberalism and socialism without succumbing to problematic forms of nationalism and trickster politics could be argued to be relevant today as never before. Revisiting the relevance of Christian Democracy in the twenty-first century, in light of its history in the short but dramatic twentieth century, is the ideal place to start the search for a meaningful politics.

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